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The Wilderness Road

By FRANCES HIGGINS, Washington County

AMONG the choice of automobile routes from Hoosierdom to Florida is the Dixie Highway which makes its way across the States from Chicago to Miami. The scenic stretch between these points is the "Old Wilderness Road" or "Boone Way" of Kentucky. It is also the most interesting from a historical viewpoint. It is now being improved in the various counties through which it passes, and another year will bring its transformation from a typical mountain road to a modern automobile highway—a link in the Dixie route.

James Lane Allen says: "It is impossible to come upon this road without pausing, or to write of it without a tribute." Those motorists, who have already braved the mule-roads of the Cumberlands, are enthusiastic about the region. It is without a doubt one of the picturesque spots of America. The mountains afford a "wild, romantic, prospect" as they did to the pioneers, and "the aspect of those cliffs is so wild and horrid that it is impossible to behold them without terror" (Boone). The rugged beauty of the Pineville region has been compared to the old world: its forests are still as dense as in the early days. The Cumberland river is a mountain stream of rare beauty, that adds many a picturesque feature to the landscape.

But to many a Hoosier motorist the old Wilderness Road will be more than a scenic mountain highway—it will be a pilgrim way. For it was by this route that so many of our ancestors came over the great divide to Indiana Territory. The automobiles will traverse the very steps of the pioneers. From Mt. Vernon, Kentucky, to Cumberland Gap the route is exactly the same as was marked out by Daniel Boone himself. No more fitting monument could be erected to this hero and idol of the West than the present improvement of his road.

No ancient road has done so much for society as this

one; the West owes much to "Boone Way." It contributed not only to the development of Kentucky, but of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri. The great emigration by way of the Wilderness Road has no parallel in history. For more than twenty years they came, an almost endless throng. It is almost impossible to estimate their number. In one year alone thirty thousand came from Virginia and North Carolina to Kentucky. That Indiana's growth was affected by this great emigration is shown by many old records. The story of our ancestors who came from Virginia and the Carolinas has been repeated frequently this centennial year.

The name Wilderness Road arose from the nature of the country through which the pioneers first blazed the trail. It was a wilderness, indeed, with primeval forests on every hand. George Washington as a surveyor in eastern Kentucky, discovered trees of almost fabulous size, as did Dr. Thomas Walker, who came after him. Between these giant oaks, elms, and sycamores was an almost impenetrable thicket of vines, laurel, hazel and brush through which the pioneers were obliged to cut their way. Along the water courses were numerous canebrakes; the streams themselves were deep, and at times most difficult and dangerous to ford. This has been called the "longest, blackest, hardest, road of pioneer days." Only experienced teamsters could bring a wagon safely over the mountains. For brakes down the steep western slope, forest trees were felled and dragged behind the wagons to be cast aside at the foot, where they became so numerous as to impede the way.

The great terror of the road was the savage Indian, whose hunting grounds extended to the border settlements of Virginia. Rarely a day passed but some of the emigrants were attacked, murdered or scalped. There were other dangers also. "On their way through the wilderness they encountered bear, buffalo, wolves, wild-cats and sometimes herds of deer. Thus they moved cautiously onward in a long line through a narrow bridle-path, so encumbered with brush as to impede their progress, and render it necessary that they should sometimes encamp for days in order to rest their weary pack-horses, and forage for themselves."

Many families joined together for mutual safety and pro-

tection from the Indians. Ten and twenty often united for the journey and a great caravan of two hundred families is recorded in an old account of the trail. Whole churches moved in a body into the West. During the great emigration the Society of Friends vanished entirely from South Carolina. The State of Kentucky finally provided an armed guard for the protection of the emigrants in the Cumberland region—at one time fifty, at another time one hundred men. The hero-martyr of those days was Captain James Estell.

Other historic characters who traversed the "Boone Way" were General George Rogers Clark, Benjamin Logan, and Col. Richard Henderson. As this was our best connection with the east, no doubt our earliest congressmen, political and military leaders used it in passing between the capitals. From the "high swung gate way" of Cumberland Mountain Gap the road extended to Crab Orchard, Kentucky, and from Crab Orchard to the Falls of the Ohio. A western extension ran from the Falls to Vincennes, Indiana, and thence to St. Louis on the Mississippi.

The story of the great emigration is told today by the gray-haired children of the pioneers. In southern Indiana the story of the pioneer mother who walked from the older land is common. You will be told of Abigail Coffin, who as a young girl walked beside the ox-cart that contained all the possessions of the family, and carried in her hands the 500-sleigh for the loom. Or you may hear the pathetic story of Mary Hollowell, the orphan girl, who brought her small brother to Indiana Territory with a company of North Carolina families. The two walked the entire distance and even helped push the wagon up the steep mountain roads. For this privilege the sister paid by dropping corn at the rate of ten cents a week. It is with much pride that the stories are repeated by the descendants today. There are some who can remember the wagons in which their parents made the long journey. These, unfortunately, have long ago gone to decay in some forgotten corner of our Indiana farm-yards.

There are, however, many relics of the days of the Wilderness Road which have been brought to light this centennial year. They make those times seem very near to us. The old compass which was used to guide the way over the moun-

tains and on across the Ohio, served also as a clock by day. Among other relics that have survived the years and the ravages of time are chests and trunks and an occasional bit of willow ware. There are also letters, diaries, wills and marriage certificates in the hand-writing of the pioneers. Some of the handiwork of these ancestors of ours is greatly treasured. You may find a neatly made herchief, or a skein of thread, or a sampler that was made in the "Old North State." And in some sections of the southern hills are splendid specimens of the southern cypress, now more than a century old, which were brought by the pioneers from the old home across the mountains.

Surely the Hoosier motorist enroute to Florida over the Dixie Highway will see much more than the scenic beauty of the Cumberland region. The way is well marked—there is a monument to Boone at the Gap, another at Flat Lick in Knox county. The mountain folk will point out to you where the Warriors' Path branched from the Wilderness Road and made its way to the north. A tributary of Fighting Creek bears the name of Trace Branch from its location near the Boone trace. On the hills above Fighting Creek is a lonely grave which is said to be that of a child, a member of Boone's party. In the vicinity of the Gap there are stones that mark the various engagements of the Civil War, which took place there.

The Cumberlands occupy a peculiar place in the literature of our country, and are better known in popular novels than elsewhere. But with the advent of the railroad and the opening of rich mines, the mountains are coming to. The days of feuds and feudists are rapidly passing. No one is more interested in the improvement of the road than the mountaineers themselves. There are, however, old world ways and primitive customs that make side trips in the region well worthwhile, and add greatly to the charms of the historic "Boone Way."